THRILLING EXPERIENCE ABOARD ARMY TRANSPORT

(Republished from the Wide World Magazine) BY A. P. TAYLOR.

When the Japanese Government recently offered for sale the former Austrian steamship Siam, a prize of the late war, there was concluded one of the most remarkable romances of the United States army transport service. Four flags have so far flown over this steamer, but her career is not likely to conclude under the ensign of the Land of the Chrysanthemum.

Christened on the banks of the Clyde in the early nineties as the British tramp steamer Resolve, the vessel later passed into the hands of an Austrian corporation at Fiume, and was renamed the Siam. Fate and charterers sent her to the Pacific Ocean in the second year of the Filipino insurrection, and she was chartered by an American firm of San Francisco and entered the coal trade between Nanaimo and the Bay City.

In the summer of 1899 the United States War Department assembled at Jefferson City, Missouri, one of the finest trains of experienced army mules and horses ever organized for foreign service. From Cuba, from the northern borders of the United States, from frontier army posts, and, in fact, from every part of the United States where the quartermaster's insignia were in evidence, these animals were brought to the common rendezvous in Missouri. They were the pick of the army—staid old mules and horses that had been in the service for years, and knew almost as much of military discipline as the men in blue. Their transhipment to the Presidio at San Francisco followed in July, and then the war department cast about for a vessel in which to ship them to Manila, where General Otis was even then delaying important army movements in order that these animals might accompany the troops to "the front."

The Siam had just returned from Nanaimo with a cargo of coal. She was a fine, big, ten-knot boat, with Austrian officers and sailors. The war department decided, although she flew the flag of the Emperor Joseph, that she was just the vessel needed. Early in August, after several weeks of hammering, sawing, and building of superstructures, three hundred and seventy-three horses and mules were sent aboard and placed in separate stalls for the long voyage to Manila. The loading of the animal cargo was a matter of much concern to the war department, with the result that almost the pick of the packers and teamsters of the army—fifty-six in all—were chosen for the voyage.

In command of these rough-and-ready plainsmen was Captain J. P. O'Neil, 25th Infantry, United States Army. Captain O'Neil was just the sort of man to deal with the cowboys—no army dandy, but a true-blue soldier, and the men admired and loved him.

Among the horses was the thoroughbred presented to General "Joe" Wheeler, United States Army, by the citizens of Alabama after his return from the Cuban campaign. "Beauty" he was called by the men, and he was given a place of honor near the officers' cabin. Yet another splendid animal was the horse belonging to Miss Wheeler, daughter of the General, who was then an army nurse in the Philippines.

The officers and crew were all Austrians, with the exception of two engineers. The commander was Captain Sennen Raicich, sailor, gentleman, and postage-stamp connoisseur. His hobby was rare stamps, and his cabin was filled with cases containing valuable specimens. Every day he went over his collection, labelling, classifying, and docketing the new ones which he had purchased at the last port. The collection was valued at about twelve thousand dollars, and was insured. Messrs. Xigga and Stepanovich were his two officers. Captain, mates, and crew all hailed from the section of Austria nearest Fiume.

Ten days after leaving San Francisco the Siam reached Honolulu, and the horses and mules were taken ashore and sent to the government corrals, where they recuperated for two days. During this time Captain O'Neil spent much time considering the arrangement of the stalls. These were arranged along the main deck and in the first hold below. Over the exposed portions of the main deck superstructures had been raised to protect the animals from the elements. The forward deck was loaded with hay and grain for use during the voyage, while between decks was a stock of forage. Over the officers' section a deck-house was built, and used as a sleeping-place for the cowboys.

The Honolulans took great interest in the horses, and hundreds examined the stalls, which were arranged along the sides of the steamer, the animals facing inward. Small chains hasped to the supports on either side led to the rings of the halters. Cleats were nailed to the flooring to give the animals a footing during storms. The leisure time of the cowboys was spent in making canvas "slings," intended to be placed beneath the bellies of the animals during bad weather, the ends fastened to rings in the deck above, to assist the animals in keeping on their feet should the vessel roll awkwardly. The transport service had much to learn, and the use of slings was a costly lesson.

For several days the voyage toward the Philippines was delightful. Half-cloudy days and trade winds maintained an even temperature throughout the ship. Officers, crew, cowboys, the few passengers, and the animals were on the best of terms. Captain O'Neil cheerfully looked forward to the day when the Siam should steam into Manila Bay and he could report the voyage successfully ended and without the loss of an animal. Captain O'Neil's enthusiasm was communicated to the cowboys, and they resolved to make a reputation for the voyage and land their animals safe and sound. Alas for human hopes! That voyage was to prove the most disastrous in the annals of the American transport service.

On the morning of September 17th came a change in the direction of the wind. The officers consulted the barometer, and the land-lubbers, taking amateurist observations of their own, saw that it was falling. Then came a few gusts, the sky changed while a terrific storm burst over the steamer. The vessel rolled, and the horses, unused to such a motion, had difficulty in retaining their feet. Clouds of spray dashed over the bridge and tons of water broke upon the decks. The stalls were flooded and became slippery, and the animals frequently fell. Sometimes a lurch threw at least fifty from their feet. Instantly there was a struggling, on the decks. The cowboys, although experiencing the first real nausea during the voyage, bravely went among the helpless brutes and assisted them to their feet. For two days and nights

"A MASS OF MADDENED, SCREAMING BRUTES."

this went on, and few men were able to sleep. Finally things got so bad that Captain O'Neil sent a written request to Captain Raicich to change the course of the vessel to any direction that would give the least motion to the ship.

Those who have never been to sea may not know the danger of putting a vessel about in a sea which is piling up angrily from every direction. The order was sent through the ship that she was to go about, and everyone clung to a support during the manoeuvre. Gradually the vessel answered her helm; the roaring wind beat against her hull, heeling her far over, until the landsmen clung desperately to anything handy to prevent them sliding into the boiling sea. At length the manoeuvre was safely executed, and all hands breathed a sigh of relief. The vessel scudded before the wind, riding more easily, though she was going far out of her course.

When the sun broke through the clouds a tropical-looking island loomed up on the horizon, which proved to be the island of Saipan, of the Ladrones group, just to the north of Guam. Whether it was inhabited those aboard did not know, for there was not on the ship a chart or book bearing upon the island. A mysterious column of smoke shot up from a grove of trees as the vessel passed by, followed by a second and a third. A "council of war" was held. Were the mysterious smoke signals sent up by shipwrecked sailors or by natives with questionable intentions? Captain Raicich cut the Gordian knot with the statement that the Siam was under contract to the United States Government at six hundred dollars a day, and as considerable time had already been lost he could not for a moment think of detaining the vessel while an investigating committee went ashore.

After that storm the ship was a hospital, for two hundred and thirty-three horses and mules were more or less injured, and every man devoted his whole time to caring for them. Strange to say, many of the cowboys and mules had been associated for years in government work, and they were therefore old friends, and the men were sympathetic veterinary nurses. Six animals died of their injuries.

That storm was a heartrending setback to the ambitions of Captain O'Neil. However, he made the best of the experience by preparing for similar episodes. One day the engines gave out, and the vessel lay to for several hours while the engineers and firemen worked like Trojans to repair the damage. At first it was decided that the vessel, being then near the Philippines, could make port with the one uninjured engine, but it was finally decided that it would be best to repair the damage at sea. It was well that this decision was arrived at, otherwise the Siam would never have reached port.

On September 29th the steamer was close to Cape Engano, on the northern coast of the island of Luzon. On the morning of September 30th the sky became overcast, the wind freshened, and the barometer fell. In the afternoon there was a peculiar glow in the clouds, which behaved most curiously; they seemed caught in currents of wind and were stretched out across the heavens in orderly lines, parallel with the horizon. To the landsmen none of the signs were ominous, but the ship's officers sent orders quietly among the crew.

A passenger, going into the chart-room, from which an officer had made a hurried exit, saw a book on navigation lying there. It was open at a chapter on typhoons, and there were underscorings where "China Sea," etc., occurred in the text. The passenger looked at the barometer again, saw that it had fallen, and began to understand. There was an ominous silence throughout the vessel, and a peculiar stagnant feeling impregnated the air. The growing sense of menace affected every living thing aboard; the plainsmen had long since stopped chaffing and the animals stamped uneasily.

Meanwhile the crew were very busy. Canvas shields were taken in, rigging was examined, and the captain went below to the engine-room and consulted with the engineers.

Evening came on, the sea began to stir, and the crests of little waves broke sharply. The Siam was now in sight of the northernmost portion of Luzon, and as Cape Engano was approached she was slowed down, but the captain and officers looked in vain for the light-house on the cape. At ten o'clock the commander changed the course of the vessel from west to north, thereby keeping out of the channel above the cape, for he would not risk entering the waterway without first picking up the light.

It was well that he formed this decision, for at eleven o'clock the heavens and the sea seemed to meet in a mighty clash. There was one mighty reverberating roar, the steamer heeled over, the wind howled through the rigging, and the stern, lifting high out of the water, permitted the propeller to race, shaking the vessel from stem to stern. The gong and bells rang sharply in the engine-room, the propeller stopped racing, stopped altogether, spun again. The tramping of feet sounded along the decks; orders were shouted from the bridge in Austrian. The cowboys gathered on the main deck and waited anxiously—for what, they did not know. Then the passenger transmitted the knowledge of the open book in the chart-room to the landsmen. A typhoon was on, perhaps, he suggested. "Typhoon" in the China Sea, "hurricane" in the Atlantic "pampero" off the South American coast, "cyclone" on land—all mean much the same thing. The most terrifying storm a vessel could encounter held the Siam in its mighty grip.

Then, almost without warning, a demoniacal sea and a fearful wind, with legions of horrible, never-to-be-forgotten night terrors, appeared to leap upon the ship from the darkness.

A sickening dread crept into my heart. In fifteen minutes the whole fury of the typhoon was upon us. It was almost midnight of September 30th when we realized, by a glance at the captain's face as he rushed into the chart-room, that a battle for our lives was upon us. It was human science matched against the ungovernable fury of the elements. Which would win?

I made my way to the bridge, clinging now to a rope, and now down upon my knees with my arms around a stanchion. By main force I held on to the wheel-house, where the captain and his two mates directed the course of the stricken ship. Their faces were set with grim determination, their eyes staring fiercely now at the compass and then at the boiling seas, which pitched and rolled us about like a paper box. The wheel flew round from side to side. One end of the bridge rose and towered above me until I leaned over almost upright against the ascending deck, and as suddenly it fell until it seemed to plough the water. The wind, blowing at eighty miles an hour, tore canvas and rigging to shreds.

Suddenly the bow lifted high upon a monster wave. Higher, higher, higher it rose, while the stern sank down into a yawning chasm. Simultaneously a huge wave struck us abeam. Down came the bow, and over heeled the steamer upon her side. From below came the nerve-racking bellowing and screaming of the terrified animals as they strove madly to keep their feet. Hoarse shouts came up from the lower decks, where the cowboys were endeavoring to help their charges. Now and then there was a crash as an animal was flung bodily out of its stall across the deck, where it smashed stalls and set other animals loose. Each time the ship rolled I set my teeth, for each swing seemed about to plunge us into the boiling black abyss below. Often my heart seemed to stand still, and I waited for the moment when our devoted band would be hurled into eternity.

Present half-a-dozen of us descended to the stokehold in order to send ashes up to the deck to be spread under the hoofs of the struggling animals. Out of that stifling hole bucketful after bucketful was hoisted until the deck was strewn with debris. But the heat of the stokehold and the unusual labor caused the amateur stokers to sicken, and, exhausted and nauseated, we climbed to the deck again and lay there gasping.

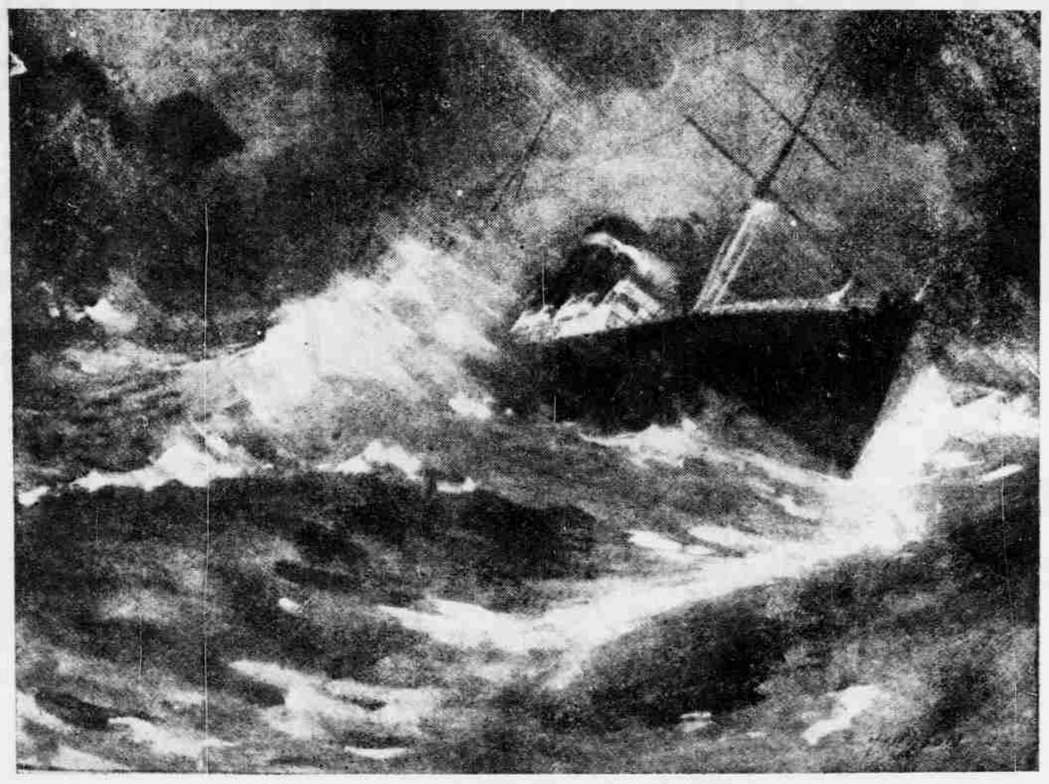
With morning the storm grew worse. At nine o'clock Captain Raicich determined to heave the ship to, but the plan had to be abandoned, owing to stress of weather. The steamer was compelled to head directly into the wind, which eddied in dizzy concentric circles around a larger circumference. My diary contains the following notes jotted down on the afternoon of October 1st, written mainly in shorthand while I lay ill in my bunk:—

"Good heavens! Another such day and night as we have been having and I believe I shall become insane. Buffeted and tossed about like a feather, careening, rolling, and pitching, the Siam seems ready to take her final plunge. Just now a great wave lifted the bow until it seemed the vessel would stand straight upon her stern; the stern went down and threw us up again with a terrific lift. A wave strikes the bow and races the full length of the vessel, tearing everything lose it can rip from its fastenings. It is sickening. I am writing this in the very midst, the center, of the worst kind of storm one can encounter at sea. The men are shouting and cursing, the animals pawing and uttering plaintive sounds.

"We don't know where we are. We know we are heading north-east to get away from ragged reefs which lie to the north of Luzon. We are steaming directly in the face of the typhoon and make no progress. The barometer has fallen twelve points since noon. May Heaven have mercy on us!

"7 a. m., October 2nd.—What terrible sights I have witnessed during this awful time! The storm increased every hour of the night, the barometer going down from 82 to 30, disclosing the fact that we were heading directly toward the centre of the typhoon. We have rolled so heavily that the rail goes under at each dip. The men remained at their posts in the stable division, striving to keep the animals from plunging out of their stalls from sheer terror. A return lurch, and down go a score—a mass of maddened, screaming brutes. From every part of the ship whistle-signals are heard calling for help. None can be offered, and there the poor beasts lie piled up on each other, sliding upon their sides and backs from one side of the ship to the other, tearing strips of flesh from their bodies, causing them to groan piteously in their helplessness. The ship is tossed every way, up and down, side to side. Heavy seas break across the decks.

"Crash! There goes the cowboys' bunkhouse on the poop deck. It is flooded, and the men's belongings are sweeping into the sea. The water is pouring down into our cabins. Destruction everywhere. Another crash—



A TERRIFIC STORM BROKE OVER THE STEAMER.

the rending of timbers in the stable sections. I hear the men shouting warnings and hear their feet tramping across the decks. The stalls have given way entirely. Horses are plunging through the hatchways into the lower stable divisions. A thud, a groan, and they are dead. The rest are piled up in sickening, agonizing masses, rolling, snorting, kicking, and endeavoring to get upon their feet. No man dare move from his holding-place. One has to stand almost upon the cabin wall to keep erect.

"There they lie, all our pets, the captain's thoroughbred, General Wheeler's own charger. There are twenty horses dead in one heap. A mule has plunged right down into the engine-room, breaking its legs. It lay there for two hours before Captain O'Neil could shoot the suffering beast. The engineers crawled over the carcass as they stood at the throttles to ease the engines down as the propeller races.

"The terrific battle of the elements outside beggars any description from me. Intensify any storm you have experienced on land a couple of thousand times, add all the terrors that darkness can furnish, add the thoughts of terrible death staring you in the face every minute, with the sights and sounds of Dante's Inferno, and then perhaps you can gain some idea of our misery.

"At daylight the seas swept across and filled up our decks. Then it was that Spartan measures had to be taken. The hatches were ordered to be battened down, thus confining in a death trap nearly two hundred mules. We knew it meant death by suffocation to those that were still living, but our own lives were at stake, and to save our own the animals must be sacrificed.

"I am now writing in the chart-room. If we sink, I don't want to be caught like a rat down in my cabin, although there will be no chance for life in any case if we go down.

"To make our terror worse the Austrian firemen have mutinied. They heard that the captain had given up the ship. They were right, for he told us to prepare for the worst. Think of knowing that we have got to drown! Our boats are all smashed and hanging in bits at the davits. The firemen tumbled up on the deck looking like demons from the underworld. Then Captain O'Neil showed his true nature. He became the hard, steel-like soldier. He sternly ordered them below, but the men did not move. The cowboys knew instinctively that without steam to turn the engines we must surely founder. Two of the cowboys seized the ringleader, and, placing the ends of a lasso about his wrists and thumbs, started to draw the rope over a guy wire, threatening to string him up by the thumbs. Captain O'Neil had turned away when these men took the prisoner in charge. Immediately the frightened crew turned and fled down to the stokehold.

"Who can blame the poor beggars? Life is as sweet to them as to us. Two hours later they came up again, but the display of an army revolver in Captain O'Neil's hand caused them to retreat.

"The chief engineer, an Englishman, has gone insane. Thirty-three years at sea, and now he has gone to pieces! The terror of the long vigils at the throttle unnerved him. I passed him a little while ago; he was sitting in his cabin wailing piteously, his face blanched with terror. The little Scotch second engineer has been on duty almost every hour since the night of the 30th. His whole back was scalded by steam. Dr. Calkins bound it up in cotton and oil, and he is working as if nothing had happened, brave little fellow.

"6 a. m., Tuesday morning, October 3rd.—Another chapter in my experience of Hades. No one is on duty except the ship's officers. It is a ship of the dead. I have just taken a look down the upper stable division, and the sight sickened me. The poor brutes of horses and mules, mangled and torn, lay in heaps, the live ones trying to extricate themselves from the dead.

"At last the typhoon has spent itself, and by to-morrow morning we shall probably be able to get back on our course and make a fresh start for Manila. Nearly all the horses and about two hundred mules are wounded as far as we can ascertain. Soon the hatches will be taken off, and we can learn the horrible truth.

"October 4th.—All morning long the dead animals have been hoisted out and thrown overboard. How horrible it all is! The men working in the lower holds are overpowered and compelled to come up on deck every few minutes. We have three steam-winches going. We found only one live mule in the lower hold. Captain O'Neil has been shooting most of the live animals, for they are beyond hope in their terrible condition.

"Captain Raicich told me to-day that for four hours yesterday he did not know whether the ship would pull through. The Siam got into the trough and could not be steered. He said he was prepared then for death. He said he has never before experienced such a terrible storm. We don't know just where we are yet, as we can take no observations.

"What a terrible change in Captain Raicich's appearance! He never left the bridge for three days and nights. He, as well as the two men at the wheel, were lashed to stanchions. He wore two oil 'slickers,' but they are in ribbons, and the tar from them has sunk into his hair and beard and deep into his skin. He is dirty and wretched-looking. His cheeks are sunken and there is an almost insane glare in his eyes. He looks like a wreck, but in spite of his terrible ordeal he is as decisive in manner as before. Poor fellow, he hardly ate anything during the whole of the typhoon. He saved our lives.

"We have just located our position. We are a hundred miles north of Luzon, and close by are the dreaded coral-teeth we tried to avoid.

"October 5th.—We are now nearing Manila Bay and have cleared up the vessel fairly well and thrown most of the carcasses overboard. The ship is a wreck; everything seems to have been twisted, broken, torn, or damaged in some way. Up to last night we got overboard three hundred and fifty-five carcasses. This morning four more found dead and two others had to be shot. We now have only twelve animals left, some of which we may land at Manila alive. This is all we have left out of the three hundred and seventy-three. Dozens of sharks follow in the wake of the vessel. The Siam's expedition has been the most disastrous in the transport service."

As a matter of fact, the Siam actually landed only two animals at Manila. They were little Spanish mules which had been thrown into the coal-hold and, strange to say, had not a scratch upon them. They were and are still known in and about Manila as the "Million-Dollar Beauties" of the Q. M. D.